

TESTIMONY OF GINGER GOLD SCHNITZER
NJEA DIRECTOR OF GOVERNMENT RELATIONS
ON THE TOPIC OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION AMENDMENTS
BEFORE THE STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION
WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2008

Good afternoon. My name is Ginger Gold Schnitzer. I am the Director of Government Relations for the New Jersey Education Association. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

NJEA supports the idea that education in New Jersey needs to be transformed so that schools can better prepare students for the demands of the 21st century. In fact, NJEA has helped to lead this charge by working to bring the Partnership for 21st Century Skills to New Jersey. We have several concerns, however, about the proposed NJAC 6:8, Standards and Assessment for Student Achievement.

The Department has emphasized the need for personalized learning and recommends that every student have a personalized learning plan. This is a wonderful idea—yet at the same time the Department is recommending a one-size-fits-all approach of increased course requirements and testing.

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These new course requirements are supposed to bring “rigor” to our schools. The word “rigor” is commonly defined as strictness, stiffness or rigidity. Our focus should be on making courses more relevant—not more rigid. Substituting rigor for relevance will not help students succeed.

Improving achievement is not necessarily accomplished by imposing more requirements. If we do not proceed cautiously, doing so could either increase drop-out rates as students struggle with courses such as Chemistry and Algebra II or result in watered-down versions of course content, not consistent with the desire to strengthen learning.

The new requirements should include multiple measures of student achievement—not just one test—because students have different learning styles and unique needs.

Before imposing Algebra II on all students, we ought to investigate the impact of this decision. Our vocational schools produce students ready with the skills needed to enter the workforce. We must ensure that new requirements do not make it impossible for students to successfully complete vocational programs or make it hard for students to enroll in shared-time programs. We ought to focus on strengthening the articulation between college expectations and the realities of high school. Imposing one set of requirements, such as all students taking Algebra II, does not accomplish this goal.

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It took two years for the NJ STEPS report to be issued. The report was developed thoughtfully with plenty of public input. It is a collection of ideas, many of which deserve to be turned into reality. Making these ideas real, however, should be done with the same deliberation and participation that occurred when creating them.

Truly transforming secondary schools is something that needs significant time and collaboration with stakeholders. The proposed regulations were only distributed in September. The regular timeline of the code adoption process does not allow for sufficient input or the research needed to show that these ideas are effective.

The State is currently facing a fiscal crisis. The proposed regulations will have significant costs to both the State and local school boards due to new testing requirements, the need to revamp curriculum, the cost of technology and online courses, and the extra staff that will be needed to implement effective personalized learning plans. It seems inappropriate to embark on expensive plans that are not backed by solid research at a time when the state faces severe budget shortfalls and is cutting costs.

Without more time and input, these proposed regulations risk becoming a set of restrictive rules and regulations that could possibly hinder a new vision of education. We urge the Department and the Board to slow down this process and give it the time and attention it needs.

Thank you for your consideration.